

ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING OUTCOMES OF INCREASED ATTENTION ON WORK/LIFE SUPPORT PROGRAMS IS THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NUMBER OF COLLABORATIVE PROGRAMS. Collaboration makes it possible for employers of all sizes to pool resources to develop mutually beneficial programs. The idea of public-private partnership is transformed into reality when municipalities, county governments or the state can work with private agencies to create services. In addition, collaboration allows for development of a wide range of work/life support initiatives because no single sponsor has to cover the entire cost of any program.

A child care collaborative—sometimes called a consortium—is developed by a group of organizations working together to sponsor a program to serve the children of the member organizations. Members can include employers, community or government agencies, service groups and funding sources. Collaboratives were traditionally considered a good option for small employers, but increasingly, companies of all sizes are seriously considering collaborative projects in order to take advantage of the special opportunities offered by a group endeavor.

Collaboratives offer the opportunity to:

- Share expenses, risk, and liability;
- Create a larger pool of potential users for the collaborative program, which protects against under-enrollment;
- Gain access to resources that might not otherwise be available;
- Develop a positive working relationship with other organizations;
- Enhance community relationships;
- Broaden the scope of the work/life initiative being planned.

However, collaboration takes time. The nature of the collaborative planning process is such that discussion and the decision making process require more time. Each participant relinquishes some degree of autonomy, and must spend time working out the terms of the collaboration before the rest of the project begins. On the other hand, the process of negotiation among the participants gives all members of the collaborative an equal voice in setting the policy and parameters of the joint project.

You may find that each participant has different goals and different motives for joining the collaborative. This may enhance the project, but it can sometimes present obstacles as well. For example, in planning a collaborative child care program, decisions are based on employer interests. If one member wants to develop the least expensive care possible, while others want to emphasize program quality, the group will need to consider both sides of the issue and agree on their priorities before moving forward.

Getting Started

Most collaborations begin when one or two employers are interested in developing a program, but cannot proceed without partners. One company has to take the lead in convening an initial meeting, making an initial presentation on the rationale for collaboration, and following up with potential participants.

If you are interested in exploring the possibility of a work/life support collaborative, review the following steps. They are based on the experience of companies who have developed successful collaborative initiatives.

1. Make a list of potential partners. Make the initial list as broad as possible because not all those invited will attend the informational meeting, and only a fraction of those attending will eventually choose to participate.
2. Call the most likely participants before scheduling the initial meeting, both to assess their interest and to increase the likelihood that they will attend.
3. Schedule the initial meeting. In your invitation, explain the purpose of the meeting, and assure participants that attendance does not obligate them to participate. Follow-up the invitation with telephone calls to encourage attendance.
4. Set an agenda so that time is used efficiently. Consider presenting informational materials about successful collaborations, or invite a speaker to present the information. Allow time for general discussion and questions, and end the meeting by explaining the next steps. Many of the most interested companies will want to assess employee needs before proceeding, so allow time in your planning process for companies to complete needs assessments. The Office of Work & Family Life has an employee needs survey form for use by employers, so you may want to invite a representative of the Office to explain the survey process and distribute surveys to interested companies.
5. Follow-up between meetings is a critical factor in the success of a collaborative. Each of the company representatives will need to process the information about the upcoming initiative within the structure and timetable of their own organization. Some will work quickly, but others require more time and additional information in order to move forward.
6. You may decide to hire a consultant or facilitator to organize the collaborative prior to developing the work/life program. The consultant should have a good understanding of business issues and best practices, understand child care and the start up process, and be skilled at group process. The consultant can provide information and structure, and can direct discussion so that it is most productive.

Four Keys to Successful Collaboration

Learning Curve

All members must have an equal understanding of the issues, and access to equal information. A resource and referral agency or work/life consultant can be hired to ensure that all members are informed about the issues, understand the process, and are fully prepared to participate in the collaborative.

Buy-In

Your collaboration has not truly begun until you have “buy-in” from all members. This means that each member has moved beyond the information-gathering and decision-making phase to make the commitment to participate. A strong collaboration cannot be formed with passive participants and onlookers. At some point in your planning process, you will have to ask members to either commit, or to cease attending collaborative meetings.

Contribution

It is important that roles and expectations be clearly defined from the start. Early in the planning process, define what is expected of each member, and requirements for time and resources. Active participation by most or all of the membership adds value and strength to the collaboration.

Mutual Benefit

In a successful collaborative, members are motivated to participate because they all expect to benefit from the result. If the collaborative develops a program that meets the needs of its member companies and their employees, it is most likely to succeed.

Choosing Your Partners

Depending on your goals and objectives, the partners in the collaborative may share certain characteristics:

Location

Some collaboratives are made up of companies from the same town, neighborhood or office park.

Need

Typically, collaboratives are developed around a common need. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, a collaborative was developed to provide summer care for school aged children because all had experienced trouble with employee absences because of limited summer camp options.

Size

Collaboratives are a good way for a group of small employers to get big results from work/life programs.

Industry

Some collaboratives are made up of employers in one industry. In Washington, D.C., a group of broadcasters started a child care center. In Utah, several hospitals joined together to provide get-well care to mildly ill children. As your collaborative forms, be aware of the impact of competition. In some cases it can be difficult to develop a successful collaboration with a major business competitor.

Resources

Each member should be able to contribute resources to the project. These resources are not always monetary. If one member has financial resources, another has real estate, and another experience or expertise; you have the ingredients for collaboration. If each participant will be required to contribute a certain dollar amount, be specific. Determine whether a minimum contribution or "share" is required for participation and what benefits are tied to that dollar value. Determine whether shares are based on company size and assets or the number of child care places needed in the program. Decide where the collaborative funds will be held and how they will be managed. Be sure to plan for entrance of additional companies after the initial start up period and how members can leave the collaborative if their circumstances change.

All these decisions require discussion, negotiation and the development of trust among the participating companies. Working together, most companies find they can do much more than they can do alone.